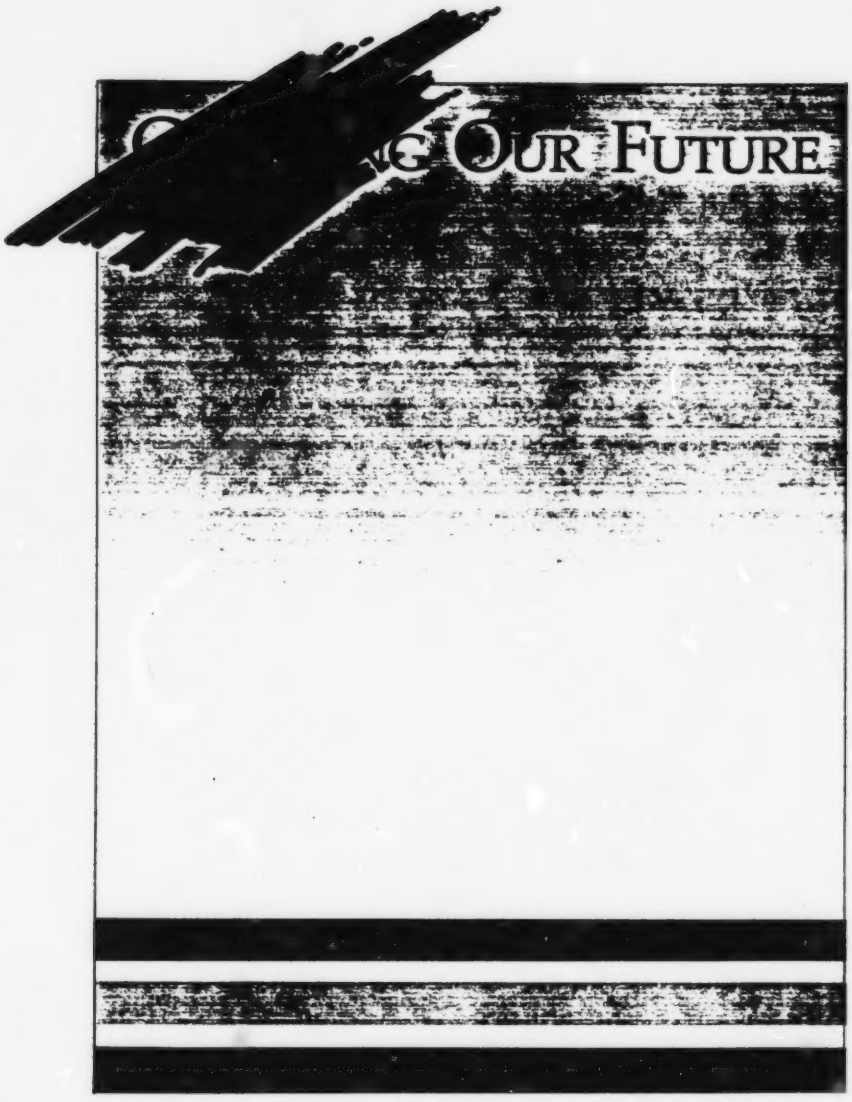

AN INVITATION TO REVITALIZE GREATER VANCOUVER'S LIVABLE REGION STRATEGY

Town Centres and the Livable Region

Greater Vancouver Regional District
April 1990

91-03853/

TOWN CENTRES AND THE LIVABLE REGION:

A STRATEGY FOR THE 1990s

A Policy Discussion Paper

prepared for the

Greater Vancouver Regional District

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Town Centres and the Livable Region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1966, the Town Centres Policy began with a statement calling for "a series of compact regional towns" and evolved by 1972 to a GVRD Board resolution to develop regional town centres. Since then the policy has been adjusted to reflect varying concerns, but it has remained consistent in seeking to concentrate suburban high density commercial and residential development and to create centres which contribute to both the overall efficiency and quality of the region.

The Regional Town Centres Policy was rooted in four basic objectives:

1. Town centres were to provide attractive locations for office development as alternatives to downtown Vancouver.

2. Town centres were to increase the variety of services in suburban areas, providing a focus for cultural, educational, and specialized facilities closer to where people live, and more interesting working environments for suburban employees.

3. Town centres were to facilitate the improvement of the public transit system and to increase the proportion of regional development that could justify high quality transit service.

4. Town centres were to distribute the costs and benefits of high density development more equitably throughout the region.

In the original conception of the Regional Town Centre (RTC) Policy, four centres were identified: Burnaby Metrotown, Downtown New Westminster, Coquitlam Town Centre, and Surrey's Whalley-Guildford. In subsequent years, Lonsdale in the City of North Vancouver and Richmond Centre were added to the list.

The RTC Policy was designed to make sense on its own, but it was also to reinforce the other elements of the Livable Region Strategy. RTC's would flourish only with good transit service; people could avoid long commutes only if job growth took place where residential development was occurring; good transit service could be viable only if there were concentrations of activities at transit accessible sites.

It is timely that, as part of GVRD's "Choosing Our Future" process, the RTC Policy be assessed and adjusted to deal with the challenges of the comming decades. This background paper, therefore, reviews the evolution of RTC's to 1990; tests the validity of the program in terms of the present and the future; establishes objectives for the policy in the coming decade; and recommends a policy framework for consideration for GVRD members. The goal of the paper is to establish a framework that will allow the RTC Policy to reinforce the other elements in GVRD's renewed Livable Region Strategy.

This paper concludes by providing a strategic vision for the GVRD and its municipalities in terms of RTC Policy. An understanding of this policy framework will not only allow the region to have a collective vision of the future, but it will help to mobilize available resources to effectively manage change. It is only through such an approach that strong public confidence in government can be developed and that the region can adapt successfully to the future.

A Regional Town Centre Policy must acknowledge a basic reality of regional development. Whether they are labelled "regional town centres" or anything else, there will continue to be a series of significant suburban retail office centres. These centres exist to serve clear geographical subregions in the Lower Mainland and (for different reasons in each case) they will continue to evolve, albeit in different ways. There is only so much influence that policy (even when backed by public expenditures) can have on this pattern.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the continued development of RTC Policy is one of the most critical elements in the larger LRS. RTC's impact in a major way on the economy, transportation, housing, community life, and the environment. Accordingly, the GVRD must give the RTC Policy a higher priority

in the 1990's, both prescribing patterns in some instances (such as transit and public services), and encouraging high standards in others (such as design quality). Above all, it is clear that all RTC's cannot and should not be treated the same, just as it is clear that the pace of development in each RTC will differ sharply. Finally, it must be emphasized that the GVRD must begin to plan beyond the 1990's; the current designation of six RTC's will not survive the decades as an adequate framework for the region in the next century.

Specific recommendations contained in this background paper call for the GVRD to:

- Promote the continuing importance of Downtown Vancouver (p.42).
- Develop a regionally efficient public transit system as the essential catalyst of a renewed RTC Policy (pp.44-45).
- Develop an RTC Policy that goes beyond simply identifying six important suburban centres. The Policy must acknowledge that there are other important centres in the economic region; it should state objectives or expectations about the size and function of each centre; and it should give specific guidelines for major expenditures on transportation service and government expenditures for each centre (pp.42-44).

- Encourage all GVRD member municipalities to adopt high quality design guidelines for RTC's in terms of use, activity, size, movement, variety and character (pp.45-49).
- Develop a regional economic strategy that recognizes the increasing internationalization of the world economy and the fact that the region must present a unified vision in national and international terms (p.50).
- Reform the structure of regional government with a view to achieving the powers and resources required to develop RTC's to their maximum potential (pp.50-51).
- Recognize the critical relationship between jobs and housing and adopt long-term strategies that encourage the evaluation of vibrant, mixed-use town centres (p.51).
- Develop regional strategies and mechanisms for the effective allocation of major educational/recreational/cultural/tourism facilities (p.52).
- Obtain policy commitments from senior governments regarding the location of government buildings and services (p.53).
- Develop sophisticated marketing strategies to direct investment and location decisions (p.53).

Notably, this study does not reach a firm conclusion in regard to a second major "city" in the region. It does note that the development of RTCs should not be expected (or desired)

to alter the dominance of downtown Vancouver or to supplant the need for small office and shopping centres to serve communities that are not close to town centres. It is, of ccurse, possible that one of the RTCs will emerge as a major regional business centre approaching downtown Vancouver in importance (such as Burnaby Metrotown or Surrey's Whalley). But not enough analysis has been done to confirm whether this is likely within the forseeable future and more importantly, not enough analysis has been completed to conclude whether encouraging such a development is the best course of action for the region and, if so, which location(s) would be in the best interests of the GVRD.

In summary, it is clear that the region has been well served by its organization and institutions to date, but serious warning signals (regional, national, international) are evident in a variety of spheres - economic, environmental, social, etc. They indicate that many tough policy decisions are required, and are required soon. The fact is that the methods and approaches of the 1970s and 1980s will not work well in the 1990s. It is true, of course, that few of the required decisions are easily made; allocating scarce resources is not easy. Similarly, however, if sensitive and sensible decisions are not made, Greater Vancouver will face an uncertain future. Yet it is

possible to manage and even control growth and change, and the successes of the original RTC Policy must be a spur for an even more proactive and visionary strategy to take the GVRD into the next century.

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1. INTRODUCTION: REGIONAL TOWN CENTRES AND THE LIVABLE REGION STRATEGY

Since the early 1970s, the Town Centres Policy has been prominent in shaping the metropolitan Vancouver region, with a broad consensus forming on the main public purposes of the policy. By 1990, the policy could be considered a moderate success. Recent analysis, however, indicates that there are a variety of key challenges to face in the 1990s.

The recent GVRD review (September 1987) of the Livable Region Strategy makes it clear that town centres have been one of the most prominent development themes of the past two decades in the sense that the Town Centres Policy has become part of the region's public and political consciousness, and that it has been incorporated into official municipal plans.

In 1966, the Town Centres Policy began with a statement calling for "a series of compact regional towns" and evolved by 1972 to a GVRD Board resolution to develop regional town centres. Since then the policy has been adjusted to reflect varying concerns, but it has remained consistent in seeking to concentrate suburban high density commercial and residential development and to create centres which contribute to both the overall efficiency and quality of the region.

The Regional Town Centres Policy was rooted in four basic objectives:

1. Town centres were to provide attractive locations for office development as alternatives to downtown Vancouver.
2. Town centres were to increase the variety of services in suburban areas, providing a focus for cultural, educational, and specialized facilities closer to where people live, and more interesting working environments for suburban employees.
3. Town centres were to facilitate the improvement of the public transit system and to increase the proportion of regional development that could justify high quality transit service.

4. Town centres were to distribute the costs and benefits of high density development more equitably throughout the region.

In the original conception of the Regional Town Centre (RTC) Policy, four centres were identified: Burnaby Metrotown, Downtown New Westminster, Coquitlam Town Centre, and Surrey's Whalley-Guildford. In subsequent years, Lonsdale in the City of North Vancouver and Richmond Centre were added to the list.

The RTC Policy was designed to make sense on its own, but it was also to reinforce the other elements of the Livable Region Strategy. RTCs would flourish only with good transit service; people could avoid long commutes only if job growth took place where residential development was occurring; good transit service could be viable only if there were concentrations of activities at transit accessible sites.

It is timely that, as part of GVRD's "Choosing Our Future" process, the RTC Policy be assessed and adjusted to deal with the challenges of the coming decades. This background paper, therefore, reviews the evolution of RTCs to 1990; tests the validity of the program in terms of the present and the future; establishes objectives for the policy in the coming decade; and recommends a policy framework for consideration by GVRD members. The goal of the paper is to establish a framework that will allow the RTC Policy to reinforce the other elements in GVRD's renewed Livable Region Strategy.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF RTCs TO 1990

A variety of data are presented which illustrate the degree to which the various regional town centres have increased their respective and relative distribution of retail, office and residential land uses. These data are presented in conjunction with reviews of the Livable Region Strategy which assessed the status of the RTCs at various times during the past two decades. An overview emerges of the relative performance of the six centres both within their respective primary trade areas and in terms of their relative status within the hierarchy of urban centres throughout the Region.

The status report on the quantitative development of the six regional town centres is augmented at various points throughout this section with less tangible but equally critical qualitative factors which influence the relative attraction of the centres as regionally important places. A particular focus is the degree to which urban design considerations have influenced the identification of the centres as regionally significant places, and the extent to which the RTC Policy developed in the mid-1970s has been implemented and supported in the Region.

A synopsis of the various data underscores several important observations.

- Each RTC has a unique position in the GVRD by virtue of its relative location, competitive economic advantage, and distinctive history.
- The differential increase in the amount of retail, office, and residential floorspace accretion in each of the RTCs during the past two decades provides evidence of a continued hierarchy of centres within the Region.[1]

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1 While there is an identifiable hierarchy of centres in the Region, there should be different expectations for each of the centres in terms of the amount, type, and rate of development it will incur, and therefore the role it will perform in the regional economy.

- The town centres have achieved a significant degree of "centrality" within the municipalities they occupy. Four of the centres (Richmond, New Westminster, North Vancouver, and Coquitlam) contain at least 40% of the municipal retail inventory within the municipality and three (Richmond, New Westminster, North Vancouver) contain at least 30% of the municipal office inventory.[2]
- At the regional scale, however, town centres as a whole are not significant business centres. Their role has been, and continues to be, predominantly as retail centres.[3]
- Vancouver continues to exercise a powerful influence throughout the Region, to some extent limiting the development of the RTCs.
- Despite Vancouver's continued predominance, significant population growth has occurred in municipalities throughout the Region. This is reflected in an improved balance between jobs and workers and improved transit accessibility to the core and between centres.
- Most evaluations of the relative performance of RTCs highlight the creation of retail and office floorspace. Comparatively little attention has been paid to assessing the more qualitative elements necessary for the creation of downtowns.

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2 These figures should be interpreted with caution, however, as they reflect differential municipal size and town centre boundaries as well as function and dominance.

3 Caution is required in the interpretation of the statistical data as a measure of regional significance. Figures on office space tend to ignore significant differences between locational requirements which exist among types of office space. For example, in regional terms there are significant amounts of office space in both Burnaby and Richmond, but these are located, appropriately, in business parks rather than in town centres. The data also illustrate that because of the relatively small size of the office component of town centres, single developments such as large government or crown corporation office relocation can have a disproportionate effect on the statistical distribution.

2.1 Development Patterns to 1990

A profile of the relative development context among the six RTCs is provided below in graphic and tabular form. Data include the amount of office, retail shopping centre, retail, dwelling unit, and commercial building floorspace to illustrate the changes which have occurred in the relative commercial and residential growth in the centres, and to indicate the development capacity which remains.

2.1.1 Background and Context

During the 1960s and 1970s, pressures related to growth were increasingly manifest throughout the Vancouver-centred region. There was, for example, evidence of deterioration within the inner city, a surplus of office space, the destruction of older housing stock, and its replacement by parking lots. At the same time, there was rapid expansion of adjacent suburbs with their characteristic tract housing and automobile-oriented shopping centres. These changes provoked unease among business and community leaders as well as elected civic officials and staff. This in turn prompted a wide debate on urban issues and attitudes during the 1960s which led to the advancement of views on alternative urban futures for the Region.

Throughout this period, growth - some external, and some internally precipitated through natural increase as well as expansion of city-based firms and agencies - forced adjustment. There was a recognition that the rapid changes which were occurring brought with them the demand for increased public expenditures on roads, transit, parks, and affordable housing. One response was the emergence of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD).

The GVRD was established by provincial legislation as a higher order confederal government to deal with issues of planning, development, and service delivery which

transcended municipal boundaries. As Hardwick (1989) has suggested, by initiating the Livable Region Strategy in the 1970s:

> The GVRD strategy was to evolve a structure that would on one hand accommodate growth, but on another maintain the livability of the region. The product of that planning process was generally in place in the late 1980s and includes development of regional town centres, a transit system, extended water, and sewer systems, pollution controls, parks, and innovative use of the water front.[4]

The concept of "regional town centres" was a central component of the Livable Region Strategy. Burnaby Metrotown, Downtown New Westminster, Whalley-Guildford, and Coquitlam Town Centre were originally designated as locations for attracting "a substantial proportion of the future office and other types of employment, major new cultural, entertainment, and educational facilities.[5] Since the original designation, both Richmond Town Centre and Lonsdale in the City of North Vancouver have achieved status as RTCs.

The Livable Region Strategy recognized the critical importance of developing and supporting strategies to manage rapid growth, and to overcome the peculiarities of the geography of the Region. Innovative solutions were proposed in a five part strategy:

- Achieve residential growth targets in each part of the Region
- Promote a balance of jobs to population in each part of the Region
- Create regional town centres
- Provide a transit-oriented transportation system linking residential areas, regional town centres, and other major work areas

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4 Walter G. Hardwick (1989), The Vancouver Urban Futures Project 1975 and 1990. Department of Geography, University of British Columbia.

5 The Livable Region 1976/1986: Proposals to Manage the Growth of Greater Vancouver, Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1975.

- Protect and develop regional open space.[6]

Promoting the development of regional town centres was vital to the other strategies of the Livable Region Strategy, particularly the land use goals - of balancing jobs to labour force (increase new jobs closer to where people live and increase new housing closer to where people work) - and the transportation goals of serving an increasing share of trips throughout the Region with transit. It recognized that each of the RTCs did not have to, and indeed should not, aspire to be downtown Vancouver, or a carbon copy of the others:

> There are features of a city which residents of the Region say are essential to them and which are also admired in urban places around the world.... Incorporating these features in every Regional Town Centre should not produce centres which are all alike. These features can be realized in an almost infinite variety of ways, so no two regional town centres should be the same. Each should uniquely reflect its local character, history, and physical setting.[7]

The Regional Town Centres Policy articulated by the GVRD in 1975 recognized in its designation of Metrotown, New Westminster, Coquitlam, and Whalley-Guildford, that there was an inherent functional hierarchy of economic activities which prevailed, and which could be encouraged across the Region. The policy was a deliberate attempt to produce a more decentralized pattern of development which would:

- influence the market in such a way as to support the concentration of economic activities in suburban town centres, as well as in downtown Vancouver.
- offset the topographic and geopolitical barriers to growth by stimulating development in the suburban municipalities, and

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6 GVRD, Regional Town Centres Policy: A Background Report, 1975.

7 The Livable Region 1976/1986, p. 19.

- use transit to link the RTCs to the core, and to promote high density commercial and residential development at major transit stations within the RTCs.

By advocating the concentration of additional economic, transportation, and cultural resources into these centres, the GVRD proposed to capitalize on the relative competitive and locational advantages which most of the RTCs historically possessed (Coquitlam Town Centre is an exception in this instance). The original RTCs were chosen because of a combination of factors including historical patterns, the potential for development as significant commercial/office nodes, and because of their potential transportation accessibility.

During the early 1980s, considerable emphasis was placed on stimulating and encouraging development in the RTCs to build "downtowns." This was partially in response to the fact that throughout the 1970s, only the City of Vancouver had more jobs than resident workers (the result of the historic concentration of employment growth). By 1981, however, Burnaby, New Westminster and Richmond had more jobs than labour force.

Trends between 1980 and 1985 indicate that the regional town centres were growing largely because the populations in their trading areas were growing, rather than the centres deflecting development away from Vancouver. At the same time, and continuing the trend which was evident throughout the 1970s, the floorspace accretion occurred at a much higher rate than population growth. It is interesting to note that during this period, municipalities without town centres achieved more rapid floorspace growth rates than those with town centres, although municipalities with town centres were capturing a significantly higher share of total development.

A GVRD review of the Livable Region Strategy in 1984 concluded that two factors contributed significantly to the relative success of the strategy during the 1970s and 1980s - an improved balance between jobs and workers, and the improved regional transit system,

including the introduction of the Seabus and the ALRT system with major bus interchanges in each of the RTCs. The review made the following conclusions:

> In the short term the strongest development prospects should be expected for those centres within the inner suburbs - Richmond Centre, Burnaby Metrotown, Lower Lonsdale, and Downtown New Westminster....
>
> A major factor in the longer term development of suburban downtowns will be the continued eastward growth of Greater Vancouver and the increasing cost of providing transportation across the Fraser River.... Both the potential volume of activity east of the Fraser River and the barrier provided by the river will create the functional necessity for a major centre. If commercial sprawl can be contained, Whalley-Guildford has excellent longer term prospects.[8]

2.1.2 RTCs in 1989

The RTCs today are actively promoted as being regional centres by virtue of the type and amount of floorspace they contain. For example, Whalley-Guildford is often described as the main shopping centre for the Fraser Valley, and at the same time, is being promoted as an emerging business centre. Similarly, Metrotown is currently a regional shopping centre primarily servicing Burnaby, East Vancouver, and parts of New Westminster. It is also projected to become a significant office location well beyond its municipal boundaries in the 1990s. Indeed, it is implicit in the 1989 review of the Livable Region Strategy by the GVRD that each of the designated RTCs is intended to be a municipal business centre which, in addition, contains certain recognizable and regionally based functions.

The Region has grown by more than 335,000 people since the Livable Region Strategy was introduced, and strong growth is anticipated into the next century. According to GVRD estimates:

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8 GVRD, Regional Town Centres: A Policy Review (1984).

Continued growth is forecast during the 1990s as the result of natural increase and migration to the region from other parts of Canada and other countries. A regional population of about 1,788,000 is forecast by the year 2001, an increase of nearly 400,000 people since 1986.

The following tables identify trends which have occurred in the historical growth of the RTCs, and outline the current development prospects for these centres.

The data in Tables 1 and 2 highlight the following general characteristics:

- Analysis of the current floorspace inventory in each of the centres reveals that they are very different in terms of the amount and mix of activities.[9]
- The RTCs can be characterized as a major concentration of retail space (10.6 million square feet), varying from approximately 725,000 square feet in New Westminster, to 3.0 million square feet in Whalley-Guildford.
- The most noticeable variation among the centres is in terms of their relative proportion of office space, ranging from approximately 2.25% in Coquitlam (108,000 square feet), to 27.8% in Metrotown (1.3 million square feet).
- Four of the Centres have a relatively balanced proportion of office and retail space (Richmond, New Westminster, North Vancouver, and Burnaby), whereas two (Surrey and Coquitlam) are predominantly retail centres.

The relative proportion of development in the RTCs and the downtown core continues to be similar to the pattern throughout the mid-1980s. Vancouver's downtown core continues to play the predominant role in the distribution and catchment of commercial floorspace in the Lower Mainland. As a result, the six RTCs function as logical niches for local and regional development.

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9 However, each centre differs significantly in terms of its total land area, making comparisons based on the function of commercial areas difficult.

FIGURE 1

Greater Vancouver Population 1961-2011

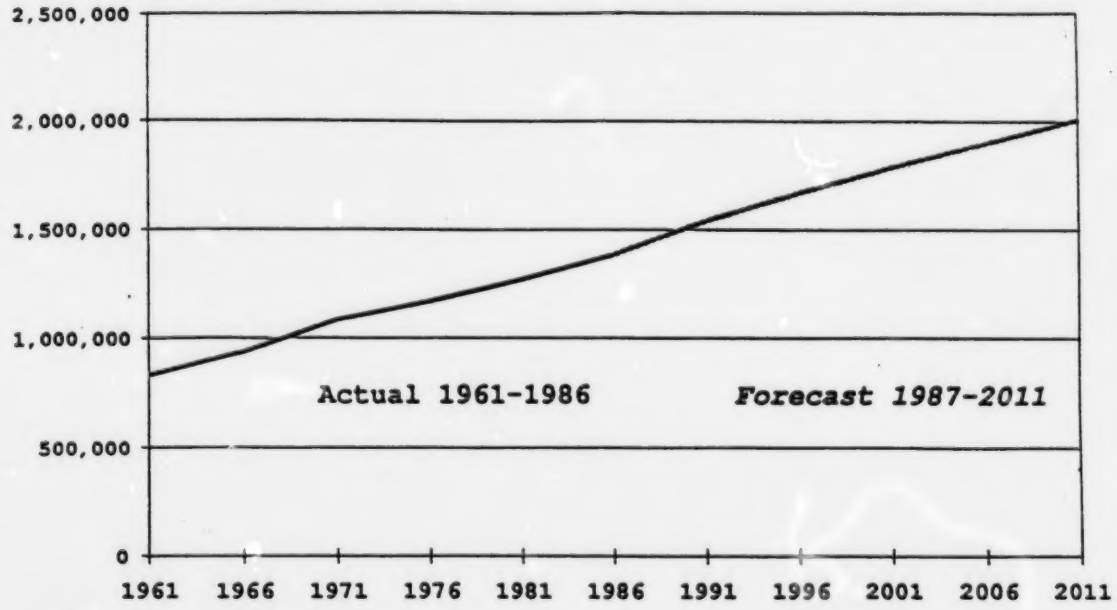


Figure 2

Greater Vancouver Population by Subregion 1986 & 2001

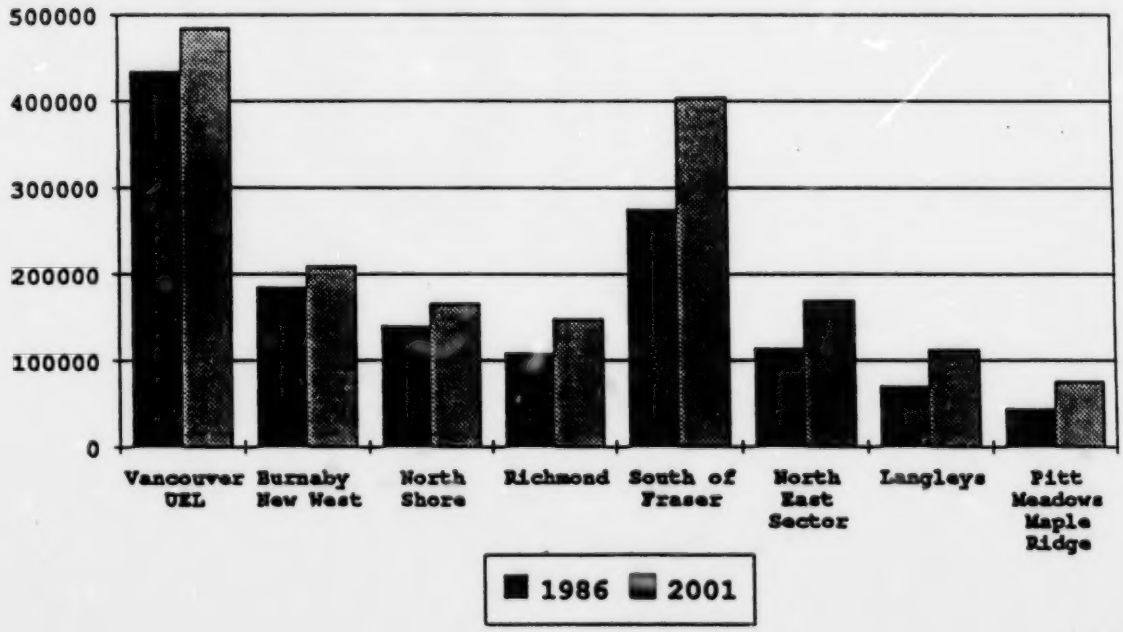


Table 1

COMMERCIAL FLOORSPACE IN REGIONAL TOWN CENTERS - 1989

REGIONAL TOWN CENTERS	METROTOWN	NEW WESTMINSTER DOWNTOWN	COQUITLAM	WHALLEY/ GUILDFORD	RICHMOND	LONSDALE	TOTAL RTCS
GVRD COM/IND DATA,1989							
OFFICE	1,382,252	586,481	114,877	532,926	1,182,838	1,184,542	4,983,914
RETAIL	2,147,589	795,322	1,895,330	3,259,639	2,029,020	1,165,106	11,292,006
TOTAL COMMERCIAL	3,529,841	1,381,803	2,010,207	3,792,565	3,211,858	2,349,648	16,275,920
SHARE OF RTCS							
OFFICE	27.73%	11.77%	2.30%	10.69%	23.73%	23.77%	100.00%
RETAIL	19.02%	7.04%	16.78%	28.87%	17.97%	10.32%	100.00%
TOTAL COMMERCIAL	21.69%	8.49%	12.35%	23.30%	19.73%	14.44%	100.00%
SHARE OF MUNICIPALITIES							
OFFICE	27.50%	35.32%	19.89%	26.64%	27.57%	73.92%	32.88%
RETAIL	36.51%	27.56%	55.73%	46.21%	41.88%	48.70%	42.68%
TOTAL COMMERCIAL	32.36%	30.39%	50.53%	41.89%	35.16%	58.82%	39.11%
MUNICIPAL TOTAL							
OFFICE	5,026,274	1,660,631	577,661	2,000,566	4,290,116	1,602,569	15,157,817
RETAIL	5,882,338	2,885,993	3,400,738	7,054,081	4,844,364	2,392,311	26,459,825
TOTAL COMMERCIAL	10,908,612	4,546,624	3,978,399	9,054,647	9,134,480	3,994,880	41,617,642

SOURCE: GVRD Development Services CIFS Data Base

Table 2

INVENTORY OF COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL FLOORSPACE, JUNE 1989

MUNICIPALITIES	OFFICE FLOORSPACE SQUARE FEET)	RETAIL FLOORSPACE SQUARE FEET)	COMMERCIAL FLOORSPACE SQUARE FEET)
BURNABY	5,026,274	5,882,338	10,908,612
COQUITLAM	577,661	3,400,738	3,978,399
DELTA	925,585	2,270,688	3,196,273
LANGLEY CITY (1988)	N.A	N.A.	1,357,100
LANGLEY DISTRICT (1988)	111,661	1,745,773	1,857,434
NEW WESTMINSTER	1,660,631	2,885,993	4,546,624
NORTH VANCOUVER CITY	1,602,569	2,392,311	3,994,880
NORTH VANCOUVER DISTRICT	333,831	2,355,761	2,689,592
PORT COQUITLAM	637,600	886,537	1,524,137
PORT MOODY	103,046	498,772	601,818
RICHMOND	4,290,116	4,844,364	9,134,480
SURREY	2,000,566	7,054,081	9,054,647
VANCOUVER	31,385,267	27,858,076	59,243,343
WEST VANCOUVER	539,485	1,380,319	1,919,804
WHITE ROCK	122,830	460,749	583,579
GVRD TOTAL	49,205,461	62,170,727	111,376,188

SOURCE: GVRD Development Services CIFS Data Base

*Notes: GVRD totals exclude the Langleys.

The total proportion of commercial, office, and retail development between the Vancouver central area and the RTCs has remained relatively constant over the past five years. The GVRD data show a total of over fifteen million square feet of commercial floorspace (Table 1), accounting for approximately 14% of the regional distribution. By comparison, Vancouver's 57.8 million square feet of commercial floorspace represents approximately 52% of the regional total.

Table 3 outlines the data on the distribution of office and retail floorspace in the Region. It can be seen from these data that Vancouver supplies 43.6% of the retail space and 64.3% of office space in the Region, whereas the RTCs together account for 17% of the retail and only 10% of the office space. These figures suggest that the RTCs as a group function predominantly as significant regional business and shopping nodes, but that substantial shares of office floorspace are centralized within Vancouver's CBD, or decentralized to serve local areas such as Ladner, White Rock and the downtowns of Port Coquitlam and Port Moody. The data in Figure 8 suggest that the trend toward downtown office centralization will likely continue. Pipeline office development in the Vancouver core are likely to be three times greater than in the RTCs during the early 1990s.

In keeping with the traditional core-periphery development pattern, the role and character of the RTCs has changed little since the mid-1980s. The data presented in Table 4 suggest that the RTCs continue to be very different in terms of the amount and mix of their land-use activities. The most noticeable variation among the RTCs is their relative proportion of office space, ranging from approximately 2.25% in Coquitlam (108,000 square feet) to 27.8% in Metrotown (1.3 million square feet). Similarly, the amount of retail space varies within each centre from 3 million square feet in Whalley, to approximately 700,000 square feet in New Westminster.

Table 3

Distribution of Office and Retail Floorspace in GVRD, 1989

	% Retail	% Office
Vancouver	43.6	64.3
Metrotown	3.4	2.8
Downtown New Westminster	1.2	1.3
Whalley/Guildford	4.9	1.1
Richmond Town Centre	3.0	2.2
Lonsdale (Quay and Corridors)	1.8	2.5
Coquitlam Town Centre	2.7	0.2
Sub-total of 6 RTCs	17.0	10.1
All other commercial areas	39.4	25.6
	100.0	100.0

Source: GVRD Development Services
Commercial/Industrial Floorspace Inventory

Table 4

Prominence of Regional Town Centres Within Their Sub-regions, 1989

	Share of Retail Floorspace	Share of Office Floorspace
Metrotown	33%	27%
Rest of Burnaby	67	73
Total	100	100
Downtown New Westminster	30	36
Rest of New Westminster	70	64
Total	100	100
Richmond Town Centre	41	29
Rest of Richmond	59	71
Total	100	100
Coquitlam	36	8
Rest of Coquitlam, Port Moody, and Port Coquitlam	64	92
Total	100	100
Lonsdale	24	61
Rest of North Vancouver City and District	76	39
Total	100	100
Whalley/Guildford	44	27
Rest of Surrey (excluding White Rock)	56	73
Total	100	100

Source: GVRD Development Services
Commercial/Industrial Floorspace Inventory

The six RTCs vary considerably in terms of their relative prominence as shopping and business centres within their respective trade areas. Whalley and Coquitlam Town Centres, for example, function predominantly as retail shopping centres, whereas Lonsdale remains primarily an "office centre," and Metrotown, New Westminster and Richmond continue to play a more balanced economic role within their respective trade areas. Indeed, Metrotown and New Westminster contain approximately 30% of the total retail and office space in their regions. As a result, the character of these areas shows a balance between high and low rise development, as well as a good mix of pedestrian and automobile oriented development.

The figures in this section concerning projected "pipeline" development suggest that it is unlikely that the current character of the 6 RTCs will change dramatically over the next few years. Metrotown will continue to receive the largest amount of office development (an additional 500,000 square feet), while Coquitlam is slated to receive only 60,000 square feet.

It is anticipated that there will be noticeable changes in the types and proportion of development in Whalley. An additional 100,000 square feet of office space (a 20% increase) in the next two years will change a predominantly commercial centre into a more balanced RTC, particularly as Whalley is scheduled to receive 7,000 dwelling units in this period.

Changes in the regional character and relative size of the RTCs will become more apparent as the size of the Lower Mainland's population increases and the capacity of downtown core office development diminishes. Indeed, by the year 2011 the Lower Mainland's population is projected to increase to 2,000,000. This will have significant effects not only on the catchment areas of the RTCs, but also on core-periphery relationships. This will be especially apparent in the Whalley-Guildford RTC as population south of the Fraser River is projected to increase by over 100,000 persons by the year 2011. Moreover, as the RTCs

continue to grow they will act as magnets and a lesser proportion of commercial office space will be scattered within their respective catchment areas.

Examination of the commercial and residential land use in the RTCs suggests that they have performed well in terms of floorspace accretion, and that they have achieved measurable success in meeting projected targets. However, percentages of office, retail, and shopping centres square footage, and the number of residential dwelling starts in a given time period are necessary, but not sufficient, measures. Vibrant downtowns or effective regional town centres evolve. They include a mix of uses and activities which have a synergy that may not necessarily be designed, but nevertheless fit together in exciting and dynamic ways. They generate a vibrancy which is often greater than the sum of the individual land use components, and contain amenities (e.g., theatre) which require regional support.

A review of the current status of the RTCs indicates that while considerable progress has been made in terms of their ability to sustain commercial and residential growth, they could benefit from increased provision of public amenities, community facilities, educational institutions, and cultural facilities.

Figure 3

Regional Town Centres Dwelling Unit Development

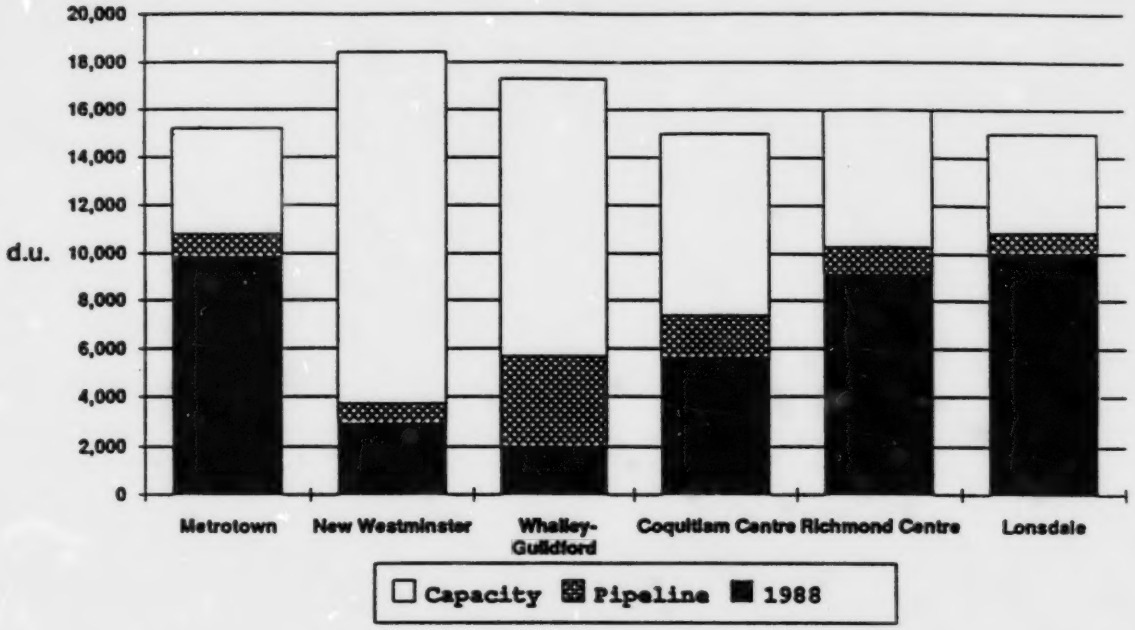
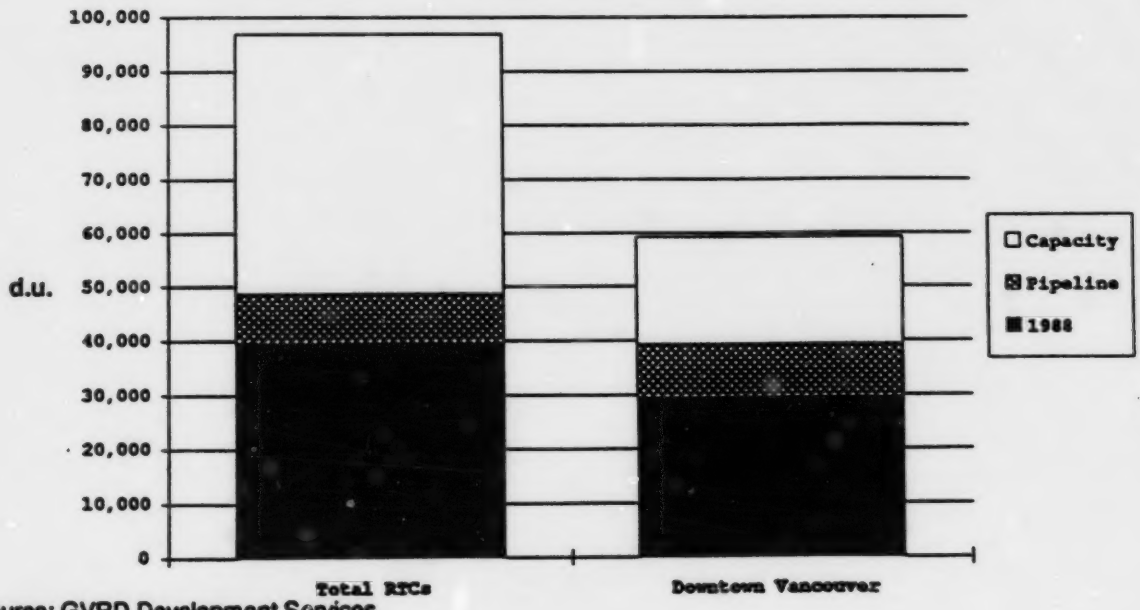


Figure 4

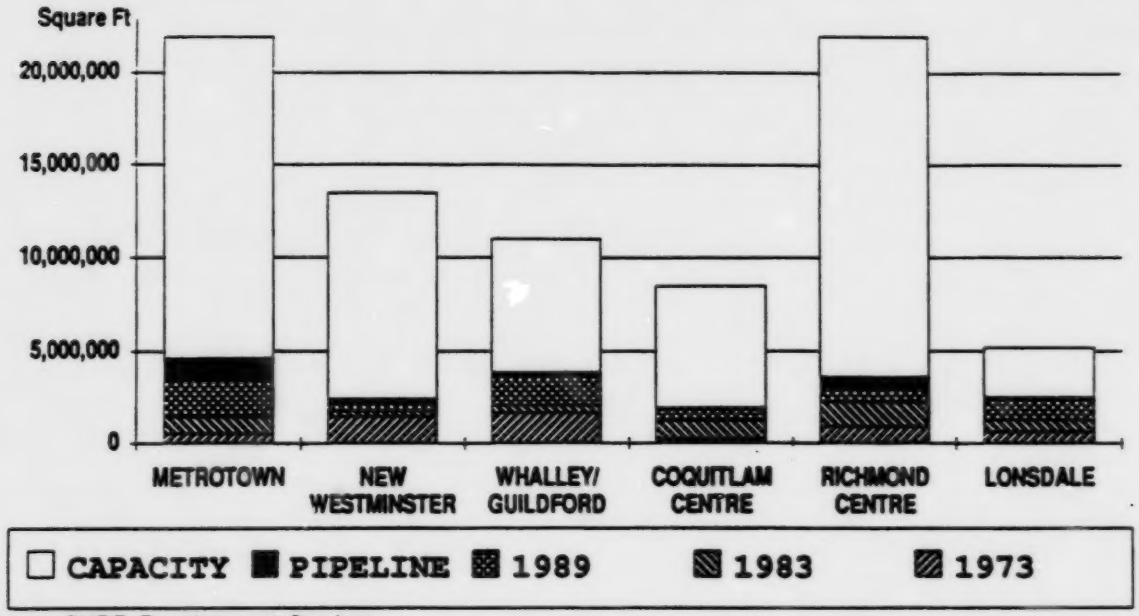
Residential Development Regional Town Centres & Downtown Vancouver



Source: GVRD Development Services

Figure 5

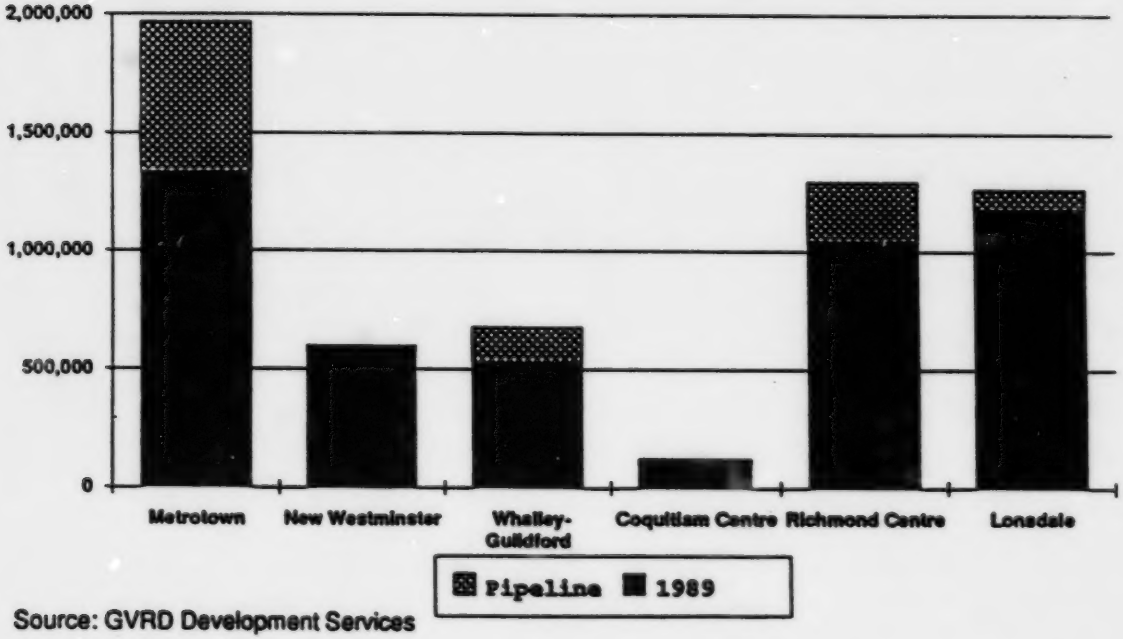
Regional Town Centres Commercial Development



Source: GVRD Development Services

Figure 6

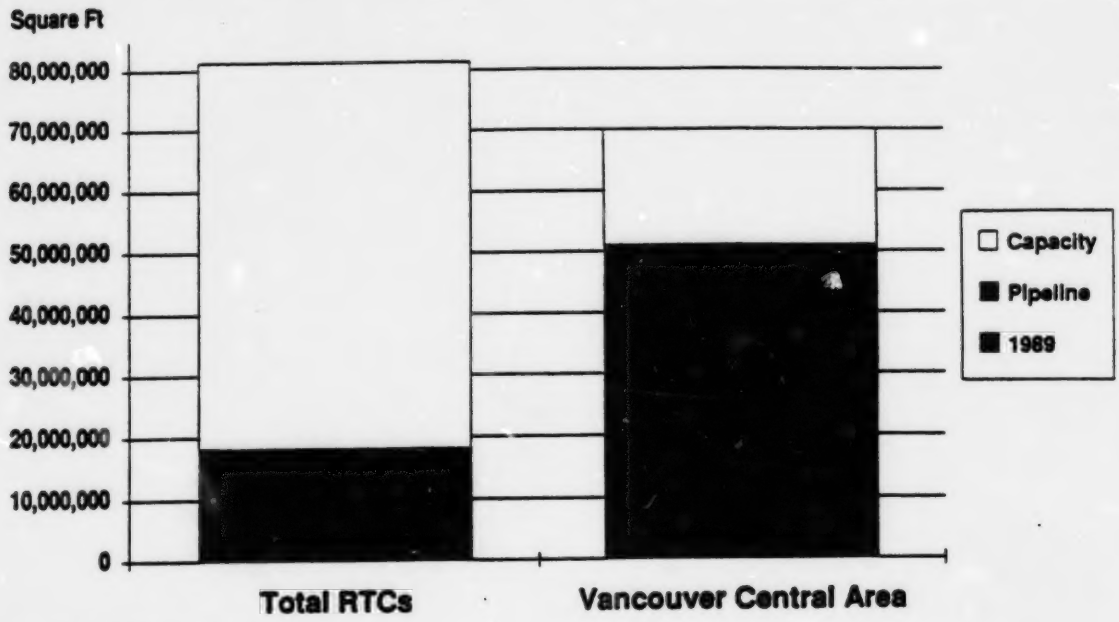
Office Development in Regional Town Centres



Source: GVRD Development Services

Figure 7

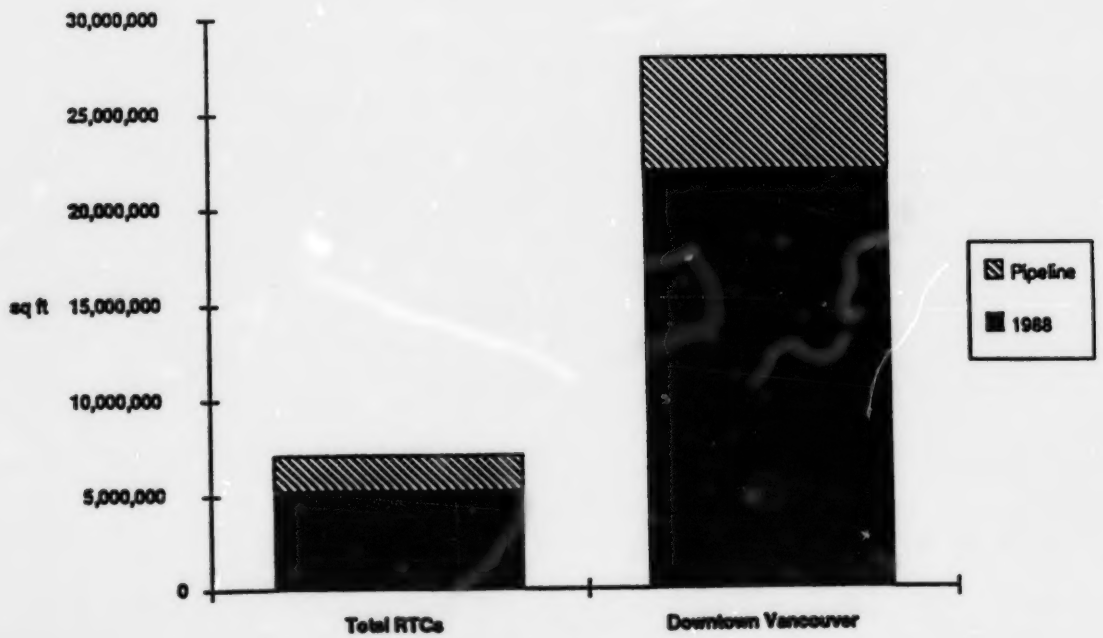
Commercial Development RTCs & Vancouver



Source: GVRD Development Services

Figure 8

Office Floorspace RTCs & Downtown Vancouver



2.2 Municipal Support for RTCs

One important measure of the importance of the RTC program over the past two decades is the extent to which member municipalities of the GVRD have been supportive of their own RTCs. In addressing this issue, it is important to understand that each municipality has a different vision of what its town centre could or should be, and different expectations about the steps and the time required to achieve the desired vision. In this context, not surprisingly, most municipalities have been adapting their town centre concepts and development strategies over time, in response to changing conditions and priorities.

The development of Burnaby's Metrotown has clearly been reinforced by municipal decisions, with the Council always wisely allowing a variety of office and business park developments to occur in appropriate locations. As a result, they have continued to develop a "hinterland" base that supports the development of a higher order centre at Metrotown. The municipality has recently started to reinforce the commercial components of Metrotown with investments in civic amenities such as a library. The presence of even more public amenities is necessary to help Metrotown make the transition from regional shopping centre to "downtown."

New Westminster has been very successful in reinforcing its town centre with public amenities, institutional anchors, and nearby high density residential development. The Council has also done a good job at capitalizing on its waterfront and its historic role as a downtown. Future competition from other RTCs is likely to limit New Westminster's commercial development potential, so it will be important for the municipality to continue to be supportive of town centre residential development.

Coquitlam is the smallest and least office-oriented town centre. There have been some concerns about the amount of office development in the town centre, but the size and function

of this town centre have been dictated more by market factors than by anything within municipal control. The municipality has demonstrated commitment to the town centre in the form of plans for major civic open space, a planned new municipal hall, and efforts to attract provincial facilities.

Whalley-Guildford has always been supported by the municipality, but the policies and strategies have not always been effective. The original "dumbbell" approach - which identified both Whalley and Guildford but did not differentiate between the two - was always questionable, and the Council has now recognized this and revised the concept in a new proposal. The coming months will be critical as a new masterplan is debated and revised.

Richmond at one time attempted to restrict office development in non-town-centre locations to reinforce the centre. This was not particularly successful. Recently, however, more appropriate and realistic approaches have been adopted, including focussing the town centre concept on a smaller area.

Lonsdale has enjoyed the benefits of proximity to Vancouver and key government investments. The City of North Vancouver has supported the development of the town centre by allowing the major projects at Lonsdale Quay, although there is not a strong civic presence in the town centre. There will be a need for co-operation between the City and District of North Vancouver, so that the District's policies for development in the Marine Drive Corridor and for commercial development in the Seymour area are complementary to town centre development.

In general, then, the regional municipalities have been supportive of the development of their respective town centres. There are no instances in which the municipality can be shown to have abandoned the objective of town centre development, or to have deliberately taken action which is detrimental to the viability or growth of the town centre. However, there

are examples of missed opportunities. Support has been passive rather than active in most of the regional town centres and it would certainly be possible for the municipalities to take a stronger role in shaping the town centre.

In defining the appropriate nature of municipal support, the municipalities have had to grapple with some difficult policy issues, including:

- the level of municipal investment that should be made in the town centre

  Initially, most municipalities simply provided a supportive land use and development regulatory framework and made few direct capital investments in their town centres. More recently, however, the local government presence has increased significantly, as municipalities invest in cultural facilities, parks, parking, transit, and civic institutions in town centre locations.

- The extent to which development in other locations in the municipality should be restricted in order to avoid loss of town centre development potential.

  In some cases, support for the town centre was (and is) interpreted to mean not allowing significant office or retail developments in non-town centre locations. One problem with this approach is that not every office user wants a "downtown-like" location: many of the users require the ground access, lower density, and lower rents offered by business park environments and many retailers want to tap trade area opportunities not fully exploited by the town centres. On the other hand, the problem with a completely market-driven approach is that some opportunities to create density in the town centre could be lost. Clearly a balance is required that recognizes that some forms of commercial development can and should be concentrated in the core and others should not.

- the trade-offs between accommodating land uses that are viable in the short term versus holding land to accommodate future higher density uses.

This is also a difficult policy issue. In some town centre locations, there is short term development potential for retail and service commercial uses and for multifamily development, but not for significant amounts of office development. However, it is office development that is associated with the development of a high density business centre. The dilemma is whether to approve short term uses, on the assumption that redevelopment will occur if the market supports higher density commercial uses later, or to "hold" land for future office development by not zoning it for the short term opportunities.

The various municipalities have addressed these policy issues in different ways at different times. At present, their approaches are generally similar and can be described as encouraging and assisting town centre development while recognizing that some forms of commercial development will (and should) occur in non-town centre locations.

Perhaps the only criticism that can be directed at the municipalities is that they have concentrated too much on commercial floorspace development and not enough on the other uses that distinguish a central business district or downtown from a suburban shopping centre. However, most municipalities are now increasing the emphasis on amenities and the urban environment.

2.3 Design Perspectives

Size is not the only distinguishing aspect of a regional town centre. Equally important are its quality and character.... We propose that these features be created as an essential part of any regional town centre:- **A strong pedestrian orientation** - activities and facilities should be within comfortable walking distance of one another along a pleasant and interesting street-level environment.- **A widely varied but balanced mixture of activities** - a regional town centre should be alive with many different activities from morning to midnight (or later, depending on local preference). It should not be dominated by one activity like office parks or shopping centres.- **A human scale** - buildings should not give people a "boxed in" feeling and should not

> **scale** - buildings should not give people a "boxed in" feeling and should not block the sun or views.[10]

There are many aspects of the built environment that can be analyzed to determine the quality of its composition. The following four aspects relate to the original objectives of the LRS and can now be utilized to assess the current status of RTCs.

2.3.1 Use and Activity

Many of the objectives of the original 1975 plan are being satisfied as the six regional town centres evolve. The town centres are beginning to evolve in their own way, which characterizes them quite differently, one from another. From a land use point of view the one component which is not being satisfied is office development of approximately 1,000,000 square feet. Presumably this has more to do with market demand than design.

Clearly, what is missing from the majority of the town centre locations is the feeling of downtown and the hustle and bustle of an urban place. Most of the town centres are evolving from the suburban forms of strip retail development or the regional shopping centre. Both of these forms are inconsistent with the use and activity objectives of the original plan in that they represent a more singular land use and, therefore, form of development. Centres like New Westminster and Lonsdale demonstrate a more appropriate mix of use which flows from their longer term urban development as opposed to the newer, suburban centres.

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10 The Livable Region 1976/1986: Proposals to Manage the Growth of Greater Vancouver. The Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1976.

2.3.2 Size

The majority of the Town Centres appear to be too large to create an appropriate focus for the community they serve. In part, this stems from the linear, suburban evolution of their development and their reliance on the automobile. Several of the Town Centres have very large block patterns established through ownership and road configurations. This phenomenon leads to large development increments rather than the variety and texture common in downtown forms of development.

2.3.3 Movement

Although the original intentions were to create pedestrian oriented environments, it has become absolutely clear that people are wedded to their cars. In part, though, this problem evolves from the suburban linear forms of development or the large shopping centre sites, both of which are hostile pedestrian environments.

Regional transit has lagged behind the original objectives and so the interconnections between these centres are few. One of the essential issues that must be addressed is whether or not the GVRD should be diffusing the automobile to a greater extent, as implied in the original plan, or giving it even greater status by accommodating it in a more direct way with the development it is serving. An example of this might be to introduce a finer grain of streets into the suburban patterns.

2.3.4 Character

In the suburban context the centres have evolved very much as single storey, retail oriented projects. The intimacy of a downtown environment is nonexistent; the street design and character consistent with a pedestrian environment is impossible because of the overall

needs of the automobile. That is, large parking lots provide the landscape for Town Centres rather than streets, lanes and mews, small squares and plazas. Continuous frontages to provide interest at street level are all but nonexistent. Some of this urban character exists in the long established centres like New Westminster and Lonsdale.

Although there has been progress in several of the Centres with an expansion of community facilities, cultural activities, and educational institutions, there is not yet the correct relationship between these facilities and the environment in which they sit. And, with the absence of office space, small support retail is all but impossible. The result is that the focus of suburban town centres is found on the inside of shopping malls, whose character could be that of any other city in North America. Town centres have not yet found their own distinct identities and capitalized on these. What has happened, in a sense, is that the environment has been turned inside out, such that the street is simply meant to accommodate traffic and parking and the shopping malls become the setting for social interaction and civic enjoyment.

3. RTCs IN THE 1990s: IS THE POLICY STILL VALID?

When the Regional Town Centres Policy was first adopted, it seemed to be the appropriate response to regional land use and transportation issues that existed or were anticipated in the 1970s. Two decades later, it is worth asking whether the policy is still appropriate, given that not all of the original goals have been achieved and that conditions in the region have changed.

This section reviews a variety of factors that will influence development patterns in the region during the next 10 to 20 years. These factors will affect the amount, type, and distribution of urban development that occurs in regional town centres (and elsewhere in the region) and are important considerations in addressing the viability and appropriateness of the Regional Town Centres Policy.

3.1 The Locational Advantages and Disadvantages of Each RTC

When the Regional Town Centre Policy was originally adopted, there was an acknowledgement that the Town Centres would differ in terms of the amount, type, and rate of development that would occur in each. In fact, however, there was no attempt to explicitly define different roles or expectations for each centre. This lack of distinction in terms of the size or function of each town centre was not necessarily a problem: the policy approach may have been to simply identify good locations for major urban centres and then let a combination of market forces and government activity determine the actual development pattern. However, there are two reasons why the omission of an attempt to define the appropriate or intended role or size of each town centre has become a problem. The first reason is that the ***expectations*** of the Municipalities that contain town centres tend to be very similar: they all want to see significant amounts of office development, pedestrian oriented retail areas, and large concentrations of higher density housing. The second reason is that the ***demands*** of the

municipalities on senior government tend to be similar. If one gets a major office anchor, the others expect a similar government investment. If one town centre gets rapid transit service, they all want it, as evidenced by the present competitive relationship between Coquitlam and Richmond.

While there was no original attempt to differentiate among the town centres, during the last 15 years they have actually differed considerably in terms of urban development activity, as was shown in Section 2.1. Each town centre is a good location for a shopping and services centre for a large subregional population and, for this reason, there is remarkable similarity in the amount of retail space that has been developed in each location. But the town centres differ widely in the amount of office space they contain, which means they differ widely in terms of their role as regional business centres, if regional is taken to mean "serving a large part of metropolitan Vancouver, not just the immediate trade area."

This differentiation should not come as any surprise because in most cases it is the direct product of the intrinsic locational advantages and disadvantages of each of the regional town centre locations. Each of the regional town centres has a unique combination of advantages and disadvantages as a business centre. If one uses criteria such as location on the regional major roads network, public transit service, size of trade area (in terms of the number of people and businesses served by the town centre), quality of amenities and of the urban environment, proximity to the airport, proximity to downtown, land cost and availability, and other factors which influence business location decisions, it is clear that each town centre will appeal to a particular subset of businesses that are willing to select a suburban location. For this reason, each town centre has attracted (and will continue to attract) different amounts and types of office space.

Acknowledging these differences should not spark wars over whose town centre is more attractive, or more suitable for office development. The point is simply that each town centre has a unique combination of strengths and weaknesses that will affect the number, type, and size of firms that will choose to locate there. Because of this, over time one should expect to see significant differences between the six centres.

The implication for policy is that it may be appropriate in the future to make explicit distinctions about the desired or anticipated size and function of the town centres. If they are fundamentally different, is it appropriate to treat them all the same, particularly in terms of major capital expenditures such as government buildings and transit?

3.2 The Continued Existence of a Hierarchy of Commercial Centres in the Region

The acknowledgement of the differences in the development potential of the six regional town centres is part of a broader recognition that the region contains a pattern of commercial centres that can be viewed as a hierarchy. The region's major retail and business centre is downtown Vancouver. A second, nearby office centre is the Broadway corridor which from a region-wide perspective is regarded as part of central Vancouver, but which is actually a distinct office location which attracts a different profile of office users than does downtown. The Broadway Corridor contains just slightly less office space than all six regional town centres combined.

The next tier in the hierarchy, generally speaking, is occupied by the six regional town centres, but there are other large retail and business centres in the region that, from a market perspective, are as significant as the town centres. Park Royal, for example, is a major regional shopping centre that is not in a regional town centre. The Canada Way corridor is an example of a significant concentration of office space that is not included in a town centre.

The next tier is occupied by a large number of community commercial centres, some of which are dominated by shopping centres and some of which are older "downtown" areas that are pedestrian-oriented, such as Steveston, Ladner, White Rock, and Fort Langley. Finally there are a large number of small, neighbourhood commercial centres.

This hierarchy and this geographical distribution of development exist mainly because of market forces, historical development patterns, and the physical character of the region. Regional Town Centres Policy can influence this pattern, but the pattern would not likely be very different in the absence of the policy.

Acknowledging the existence of this hierarchy is important in fine-tuning the Regional Town Centres Policy. The policy is intended to expand or refine the role of six retail and business centres that occupy one tier in this hierarchy; the policy is not likely to (and, perhaps arguably, should not be intended to) alter the basic structure of the hierarchy. A successful regional town centres strategy is not likely to change the basic dominance of central Vancouver as an office and cultural centre. Similarly, regional town centres cannot replace community and neighbourhood commercial centres or the small character areas scattered throughout the region. The development strategy for each town centre should define its relationship to the other commercial centres in the trade area, and in the region generally.

3.3 The Expanding Region

The "boundaries" of Greater Vancouver are increasing as urbanization moves eastward and the old division into Greater Vancouver and Fraser Valley is not an accurate representation of the region's economic structure. The easternmost regional town centres (Whalley-Guildford and Coquitlam) serve trade areas that extend into the Fraser Valley, as

retail and business centres. There are other large centres to the east (such as Langley, Abbotsford, and Haney) that are growing at rapid rates.

To fully understand the region's commercial development pattern and to best anticipate future development patterns, it is increasingly important to acknowledge that the world does not end at the GVRD border. The Fraser Valley contains large inventories of residential and industrial land, it contains airports and rail yards, and it contains natural amenities that will cause it to figure prominently in regional development trends during the next two decades. The renewed Regional Town Centre Policy must begin to encompass the true economic region. This approach is especially important since in the 1990s the GVRD will increasingly become a Pacific Rim centre focussed on Vancouver. To maintain and expand upon the region's favoured position - and to realize its evident potential - it is critical that the GVRD exhibit on a sustained basis a region wide collective sense of identity, high levels of innovation and entrepreneurship, and openness to other Pacific Rim societies. This process must begin with an objective analysis of the economic boundaries of the region; boundaries that do not match those of the GVRD.

3.4 Regional Transportation Policy

The subject of regional transportation policy and improvements is being addressed in detail in another study. However, there are some aspects of transportation policy and the transportation network that will significantly influence future development patterns in the regional town centres.

A key transportation factor is the accessibility of central Vancouver compared to the regional town centres. There are many firms that will choose to locate in downtown (or central Broadway) as long as it remains reasonably accessible for owners, staff, and visitors. If

regional transportation improvements emphasize accessibility to the core, then the threshold at which firms decide that a suburban location would be preferable will be delayed.

A second important transportation factor is the extent to which any given urban centre is regarded as accessible to/from other major centres in the region. One advantage of central Vancouver is that it offers reasonably good access to the north shore, other centres on the Burrard Peninsula, and Richmond. Metrotown offers comparable centrality, but the other town centres tend to be in more peripheral locations. This is a benefit to Whalley-Guildford, which is a major business centre for the Fraser Valley, but it is a disadvantage for the other centres. The town centres will have more potential for business centre development if their "mutual accessibility" is increased.

These two factors suggest that a radial emphasis in transportation will continue to favour central Vancouver over the town centres as locations, for those businesses which serve more than a local or sub-regional market.

3.5 Demographic Patterns

Population growth in the region is increasingly concentrating in the outer suburbs, where there are large inventories of residential development land. In demographic terms, central Vancouver will gradually become less "central," which should lead to increasing opportunities for the expansion of business centres serving areas where there is large population growth capacity. This suggests that there is an important link between regional town centre policy and policies related to accommodating residential development. It also suggests that the continued development of regional town centres is an appropriate response to future population distribution patterns.

The aging of the population is another demographic factor which will reinforce the development of town centres. As people age, their housing preferences change. An increasing proportion of the population is likely to prefer multifamily housing located close to commercial, community, and health facilities.

3.6 Multiculturalism

The existence in Greater Vancouver of a wide variety of cultural groups has influenced the pattern of commercial development. The City of Vancouver, in particular, contains commercial areas that have a particular ethnic character, such as Chinatown and the Commercial Drive Italian district. There have been shifts in the character of these areas over time (such as the decline of Robson Street as a European-oriented area), but the most significant trend is that the number of ethnic oriented commercial areas has increased.

Up to this point, this ethnic orientation has primarily affected commercial centres at the neighbourhood or community scale (although their comparative uniqueness gives them a regional drawing power that is greater than indicated by their actual size). None of the town centres has a dominant ethnic or cultural character, partly because of their geographic locations and their age.

During the next ten to twenty years this could change. The Richmond Town Centre, for example, shows evidence of a significant amount of Asian investment. The emergence of town centres with an ethnic character could alter the distribution of development and could add another dimension to the differentiation among town centres.

3.7 Shifts in the Regional Economy

The regional economy is expected to continue to shift toward service, professional, and managerial employment, with corresponding declines in the proportion of employment in heavy and light industry. One effect of this shift is that a greater proportion of regional employment will be in commercial floorspace (particularly office space). More demand for office space leads to more demand for good business centre locations, which should contribute to the expansion of regional town centres.

The free trade agreement with the U.S. could also cause changes in the regional economy that will affect town centres. If inter-regional linkages become increasingly north-south oriented, some businesses may seek locations that offer good access to the Vancouver and Seattle regions. Potentially, this could lead firms to locate in Surrey, Langley or Bellingham, when they might otherwise have chosen more central locations in Greater Vancouver or the Fraser Valley.

One other emerging pattern must also be considered. The emergence of the Vancouver-centred region as an important Pacific Rim centre will continue only if the region can maintain its comparative advantages (natural and induced) among the many cities of the Pacific Basin network. To maintain a prominent position, the GVRD must continue to recognize the importance of downtown Vancouver as the key element in our national and international relations, and develop RTCs that have special roles to play in international terms. For example, Richmond's proximity to the airport must be exploited, just as the region's various port functions must be made complementary.

3.8 Changes in Technology and Work Patterns

Advances in computer and communications technology coupled with anticipated life style changes that place more emphasis on family and home are often cited as reasons why more people will work more in their homes in the future. This trend could potentially lead to reduced requirements for office space, as more people job-share, telecommute, or become self-employed.

If this trend becomes significant, it could arguably work against regional town centres. Firms with smaller office requirements and the need for convenient accessibility to a regionally dispersed work force could be expected to choose central Vancouver locations over suburban centres.

This "negative" trend, however, could potentially be offset by the fact that communications and computer technology allows firms more freedom in their choice of location. Less bound by the need for proximity to business services or physical proximity to customers, firms may be increasingly able to take advantage of lower rents, lower traffic volumes, and proximity to employee home locations offered by suburban office centres.

3.9 Land Availability

The physical ability to accommodate office development is not a constraint in most of the town centres or in central Vancouver, so the availability of commercial development sites is not likely to be a major factor influencing the distribution of development during the next two decades.

The most significant constraint on development capacity may be the potential to absorb additional residential development in the town centre trade area. Given that the regional town centres are primarily sub-regional retail and business centres, population

growth in the subregion is one of the primary reasons for retail and office expansion. The town centres that are surrounded by large residential development capacities may be expected to see more of some kinds of growth than those whose trade areas are largely built out.

3.10 Environmental Issues

Increasing concern about the quality of the environment could lead to policies that affect the distribution of commercial development. For example, any policies or regulations that actually curtail automobile use in Greater Vancouver could be expected to benefit town centres, particularly those well served by public transit.

Another environmental issue is the apparent increase in opposition to the development of lands that have come to be regarded as important open spaces. Recent experiences in south Delta, Richmond, and North Vancouver suggest that the region's supply of low density residential land could be reduced due to changes in policy. If this happens, it is possible that the proportion of multifamily housing could increase. This would tend to favour regional town centre development, as most of the town centres have significant multifamily development capacity and the concentration of commercial and transit facilities makes town centres good locations for high residential densities.

3.11 Housing Affordability

Increasingly, the affordability of housing will become a factor in the locational decisions of firms. Businesses must be able to attract and hold a work force. As central area housing prices rise (and commuting times increase), it could become harder for central area firms to keep staff. Some firms may shift their preference to suburban locations, to have greater access to the labour pool.

3.12 Office Rental Rates

During the past decade there has been the expectation that, at some point, office locational decisions would be significantly influenced by rental rate differentials between downtown Vancouver and suburban business centres.

In theory, at some point suburban locations could become sufficiently lower in cost (in terms of rent rates, property taxes, and parking costs) that firms will pass up some of the advantages (centrality, prestige, networks) of a core location in order to save money.

However, while downtown certainly contains the region's most expensive office buildings, there are many buildings in downtown that offer space at rates comparable to, or lower than, new suburban buildings. To date, the rental differential has not been large enough to become a major factor for a large number of firms.

There are several reasons for this:

- downtown's large stock of buildings provides a wide variety of office building characters and prices. Most firms can find their niche (in terms of price, quality, size, location of space). Suburban locations tend to offer a smaller number of options.
- downtown attracts lots of developers and investors whose desire to get into the market has kept construction activity rapid. While there have certainly been cycles in the market, generally downtown vacancy rates have been high and, as a result, there has been less upward pressure on rates than one might expect.
- while land values differ, construction costs are generally similar throughout the region.

There has been some occupancy cost differential but to date not enough to cause many firms, who would otherwise want a core location, to move to regional town centres, although some firms have moved from prime core locations to peripheral core locations. During 1989

and 1990, the downtown office market tightened considerably and office rents have risen as a result. A continuation of this trend would deflect some demand to lower cost office locations, including the town centres, but it must be acknowledged that downtown still has a large office development capacity. Another spurt of new construction projects could easily push up vacancy rates again and inhibit rent increses. Downtown rent avoidance will be a factor, but not a major one, affecting regional town centre growth during the 1990s..

3.13 Conclusions

This review of a broad range of trends that will influence the region suggests that the case for regional town centres is perhaps stronger than ever. An increasing share of commercial development can be expected to occur in suburban locations. Concentrating this commercial potential in business centres with amenities, transit, services, and other attractions make sense for several reasons: transportation service is more cost-effective, more exciting urban environments can be created (meaning that town centres can become true community cores rather than large shopping centres), and the critical mass necessary to support a wider variety of services and facilities can be achieved.

To be an effective instrument for managing regional growth and major capital expenditures, however, the Regional Town Centres Policy must be fine-tuned. In particular, the policy should acknowledge that:

- the town centres have different characteristics that will affect the amount, type, and rate of development that will occur. Recognizing the different roles of the town centres should affect decisions about appropriate land use, transportation exenditures, and major government projects in each town centre.
- the region's commercial pattern is a hierarchy with several different kinds and sizes of retail and office centres, including a central business district and a large number of

community or neighbourhood commercial centres. The development of regional town centres should not be expected (or desired) to alter the dominance of downtown Vancouver or to supplant the need for small office and shopping centres to serve communities that are not close to town centres. It is possible that one or more of the regional town centres will emerge as major regional business centres, smaller than downtown but larger than the other centres. Not enough analysis has been done to confirm whether this is likely within the foreseeable future and, more importantly, not enough analysis has been done to conclude whether encouraging such a development is the best course of action for the region and, if so, which location(s) would be best for the entire region.

- the Lower Mainland increasingly functions as a large metropolitan economy, in which the distinction between Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley is blurring. The Regional Town Centre Policy must acknowledge the importance of other urban centres to the east of the six currently designated centres. Looking even further into the future, the policy should acknowledge the role that centres such as Victoria, Nanaimo, and Bellingham will play in the development of Southwestern British Columbia.

4. A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE 1990s

The tempo of change in the world - and in the GVRD - is very rapid. Public officials must adopt new attitudes and learn to treat the changes - and the future - as an opportunity. Sensitive and sophisticated planning will assist public officials and local and regional governments in exploiting the future by limiting external threats, taking advantage of opportunities, and responding positively and effectively to issues and problems.

This section provides a strategic vision for the GVRD and its municipalities in terms of the RTC Policy. A shared understanding of this policy framework will not only allow the region to have a collective vision of the future, but it will help to mobilize available resources to effectively manage change. It is only through such an approach that strong public confidence in government can be developed and that the region can adapt successfully to the future.

A Regional Town Centre Policy must acknowledge a basic reality of regional development. Whether they are labelled "regional town centres" or anything else, there will continue to be a series of significant suburban retail office centres. These centres exist to serve clear geographical subregions in the Lower Mainland and (for different reasons in each case) they will continue to evolve, albeit in different ways. There is only so much influence that policy (even when backed by public expenditures) can have on this pattern.

Notwithstanding this limitation, there is value in having a Regional Town Centre Policy to guide public sector expenditures and to influence private sector development decisions, in order to strive for an optimal regional pattern. The review in Section 3 makes it clear that there are many good reasons to support and encourage the development of a network of strong regional centres. This section suggests a policy framework for doing so.

4.1 RTCs and the Livable Region

The continued development of the RTC Policy is one of the most critical elements in the larger LRS. RTCs impact in a major way on the economy, transportation, housing, community life, and the environment. Accordingly, the GVRD must give the RTC Policy a higher priority in the 1990s, both prescribing patterns in some instances (such as transit and public services), and encouraging high standards in others (such as design quality). Above all, it is clear that all RTCs cannot and should not be treated the same, just as it is clear that the pace of development in each RTC will differ sharply. Finally, it must be emphasized that the GVRD must begin to plan beyond the 1990s; the current designation of six RTCs will not survive the decade as an adequate framework for the region in the next century.

4.2 A Vital Downtown Vancouver

The GVRD must promote the continuing importance of Downtown Vancouver. While it is clear that the LRS is attempting to more evenly distribute growth throughout the region, it is critical that the GVRD not lose sight of the importance of Vancouver in a regional context. Vancouver is - and will remain - the region's "face" in the national and international sense. Moreover, it is clear that Vancouver still has room for development and, therefore, GVRD policies must be sensitive to maintaining a vibrant, dynamic, accessible, and growing central core.

4.3 A Pattern and Hierarchy of Regional Town Centres

The RTC policy must go beyond simply identifying six important suburban centres: it must acknowledge that there are other important urban centres in the economic region; it should state objectives or expectations about the size and function of each centre; and it

should state specific guidelines for major expenditures on transportation service and government expenditures for each centre.

The policy should acknowledge the role and importance (which will increase) of the Langley town centre, South Surrey/White Rock town centre, Abbotsford/Clearbrook, Haney and even Mission and Chilliwack in the overall pattern of commercial development, as well as the existing six major centres (plus downtown).

The policy should articulate expectations and objectives for each centre because only by explicitly stating these objectives can the policy be a useful guide for transportation expenditures, government facility location, educational facility location, amenity development or any of the many ways in which governments and institutions can influence and reinforce development patterns.

Developing and adopting these objectives will require considerable effort. It is certainly beyond the scope of this paper to be prescriptive in a detailed way.

Policy development should address the central question of the appropriate (and likely) role and size of each town centre. They will all continue to evolve, but is there value in attempting to "enhance" the hierarchy? Should one or more town centres be encouraged and supported to become "super-regional town centres"? The study team has not had the opportunity to do sufficient analysis to definitively answer "yes" to this question, but the team suspects that there are advantages to having a region with more than one major concentration of development. This question should be analyzed much more extensively. The optimal pattern of regional centres may be to have a metropolitan core (central Vancouver), two or three major regional centres with sufficient critical mass to attract large concentrations of private sector office development, and several smaller subregional centres acting as retail/service centres for large subregions.

The study team believes that there are several strong candidates for major regional centres, including:

- Metrotown, which is emerging as a significant office centre, offers centrality in Greater Vancouver, and is well located on the regional transit system;
- Whalley-Guildford, which has good highway access and can serve the burgeoning Surrey/Langley area, which will absorb considerable population growth, as well as offering access to central municipalities; and
- Abbotsford, which is central to the entire Fraser Valley, which will be a major population growth area, has an airport, and shaves an hour off driving time to the Interior.

Each of these (and possibly other) centres could become a major centre, particularly with appropriate government reinforcement, and it is possible that the best strategy is to encourage them all, for different reasons. This is an issue that requires more analysis: there is too much at stake to hastily select a "second downtown" for Greater Vancouver.

Once a desired pattern is selected, it is essential to back it up with investment decisions. Government office locations, regional amenities, transit investments, road improvements, and land use policy should be driven by the regional centres strategy, not handled on an "all centres are created equal" basis.

4.4 Transportation Policies

The GVRD must continue to develop a regionally efficient public transit system as the essential catalyst of a renewed RTC Policy. In the 1970s and 1980s, the transit system played a dominant role in the development of RTCs. There is no doubt but that transit will continue to

be important in the 1990s. In pursuing policies, however, the GVRD should recognize the importance of:

- maintaining accessibility[11] to downtown Vancouver
- developing increased linkages among the various RTCs
- developing well-designed transit facilities within each town centre
- developing policies to respond to environmental concerns over the use of the automobile in such a way that the RTC Policy remains viable. Policies designed to restrict or control automobile access must be developed hand-in-hand with increased public transit facilities
- solving problems related to the movement of goods among the various RTCs.

4.5 Urban Design Policies

The GVRD must encourage all member municipalities, in as strong a fashion as possible, to adopt high quality design guidelines in terms of use, activity, size, movement, variety, and character. In order to control development, a system of design guidelines - orchestrated by the local municipality in the context of an overall concept plan - is essential. Design guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive rules as much as they are to provide intent. They must be reviewed every five years to ensure that they respond to changing conditions. As a minimum, these design guidelines should address the following:

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11 This does not mean that the current radial pattern should be pursued to the detriment of linkages among RTCs. Rather, it is to indicate that accessibility to downtown Vancouver should not be ignored; it, too, requires attention together with the broader policy concerns. See point 4.2, above.

4.5.1 Use and Activity

- encouragement of a mixture of land uses
- creation of opportunities for office development
- support of local retailing
- educational facilities for all ages
- senior and social housing projects
- encouragement of high density residences in the core
- opportunities for small industry, cottage industry, and arts and crafts tenants
- an integrated system of public open spaces

Figure 9

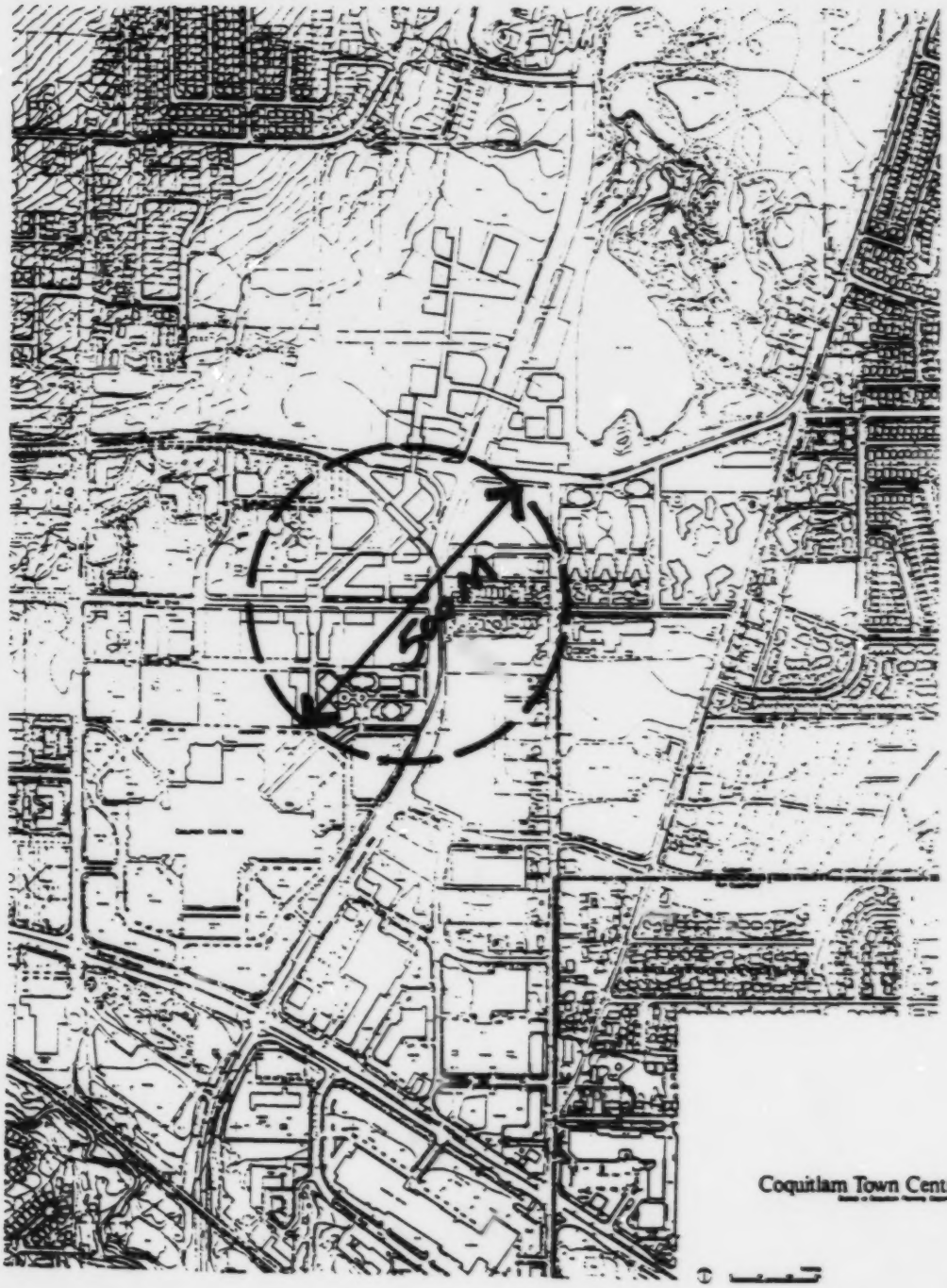
Use and Activity in RTCs

4.5.2 Size

- a compact core area, in the order of 300 metres square
- intensive development within core
- minimizing parking lots in core

Figure 10

A Compact Core Area

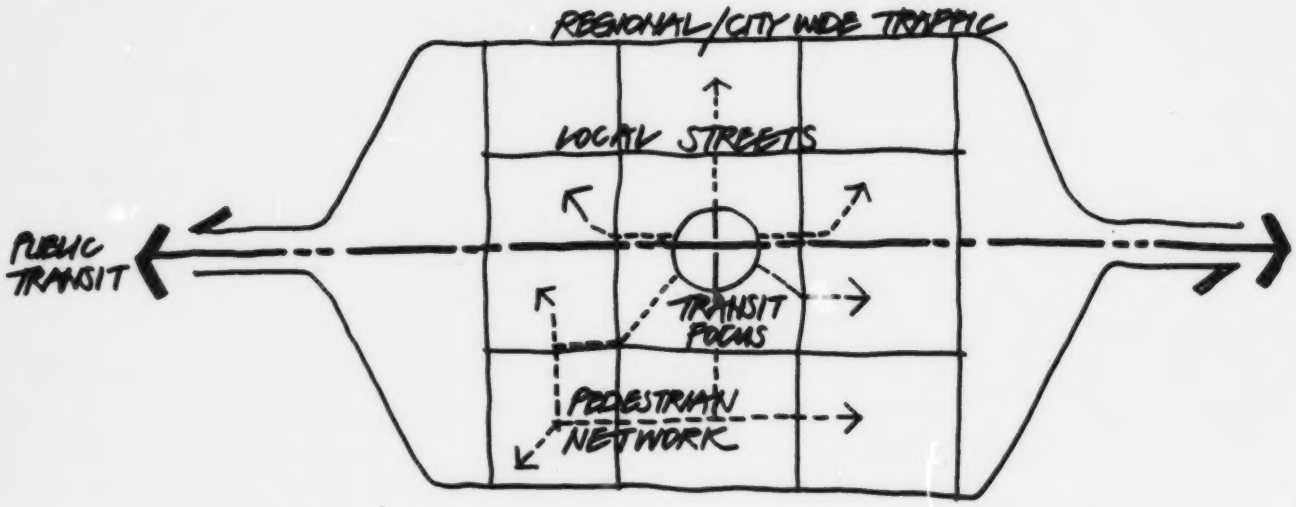


4.5.3 Movement

- provision of a transit focus in each core area
- re-routing of provincial highways outside of core
- introduction of a finer grain of streets, lanes, and rights-of-way within core area, thereby breaking down large block patterns
- introduction of a network of pedestrian sidewalks, corridors, linear parks and squares
- integration of the automobile to provide direct access and convenient parking for all land uses
- encouragement of underground parking

Figure 11

Movement in RTCs



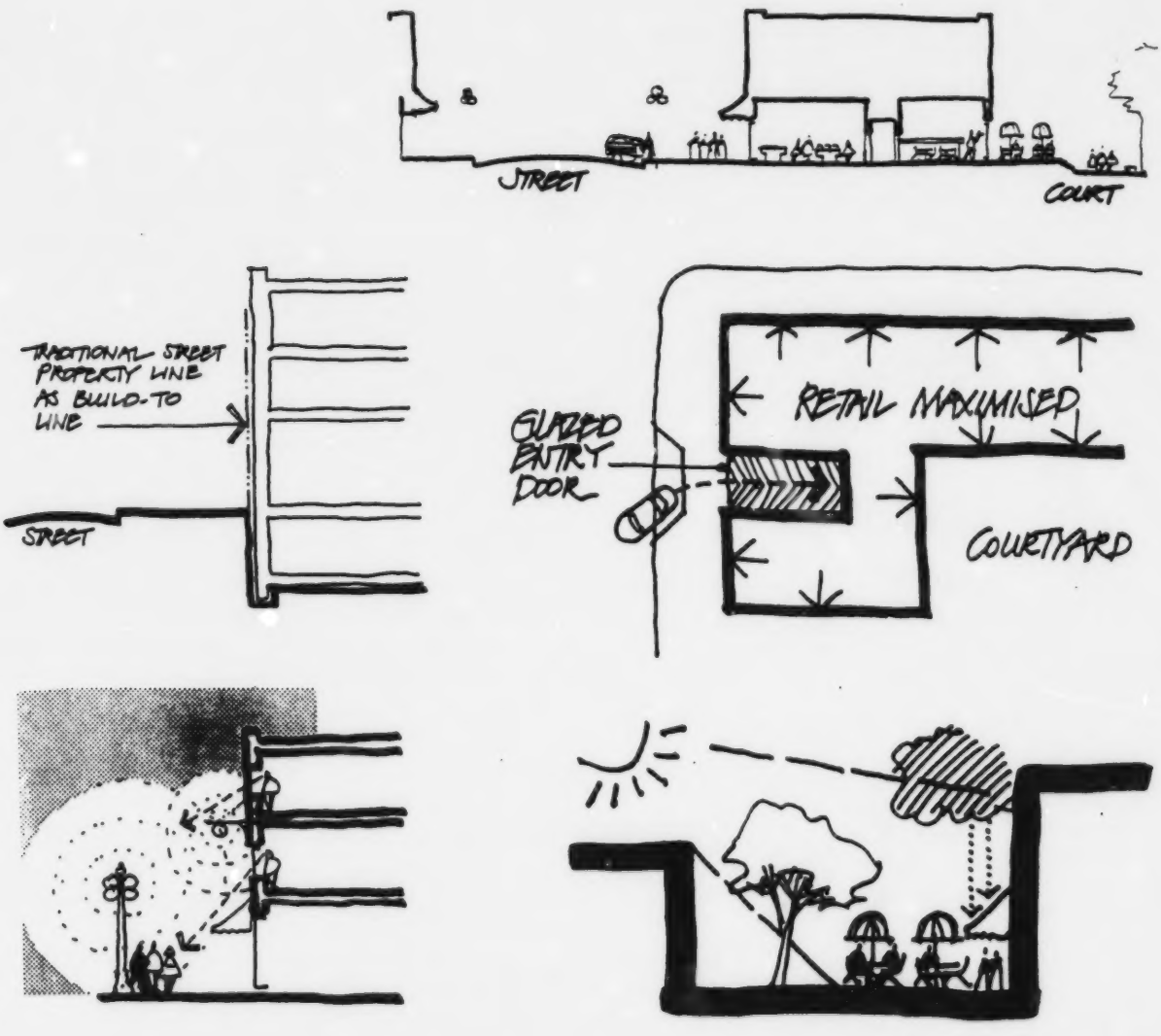
4.5.4 Character

- encouraging a mixture of forms, both low and high rise
- establishing an urban edge to street spaces, built at or near property line
- introducing public activities on ground floors of buildings
- avoiding parking lots in front of buildings
- encouraging each RTC to develop its own distinct character

- **animating the public domain through streetscaping and the use of water and sculpture**
- **providing rain protection along pedestrian routes**
- **discouraging interior malls**
- **encouraging a vertical mix of uses**
- **providing space for public events such as festivals**

Figure 12

Establishing Character in RTCs



4.6 Economic Vitality

The GVRD must develop a regional economic strategy that recognizes the increasing internationalization of the world economy and the fact that the region must present a unified vision in national and international terms. As the region - and the world - develops, it will become more and more important for the Lower Mainland to develop a regional economic strategy. While most politicians perceive that their electors prefer to maintain local government divisions - in the spirit of keeping decision-making as accessible as possible - there is also a growing need to co-ordinate economic policies (a need that is increasingly recognized by the public). To be effective as a vital economy on a national and international scale, the region's economy must be unified in terms of major elements such as ports, airports, government facilities, sports and cultural facilities, and so on. It is no longer possible to let the market alone determine the development of the economy; a regional strategy is not only desirable but necessary. The impact of such factors as free-trade, the European Common Market, and the growing importance of the Pacific Rim all point to the requirement that this region must develop a collective sense of purpose if it is to maintain and expand upon its favoured position.[12]

4.7 An Evolving Regional Government

The GVRD must work to reform the current structure of regional government with a view to achieving the powers and resources required to develop RTCs to their maximum potential in the 1990s. It is recognized that the current municipal boundaries create serious planning challenges. Given scarce resources and strong international competition, the GVRD

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12 See, for example, T.A. Hutton and H.C. Davis, "Vancouver as an Emerging Centre of the Pacific Rim Urban System," in Proceedings, Pacific Rim Urban Development Council Annual Conference, Los Angeles, August 1989.

must have increased powers to provide critical infrastructure in a manner designed to promote the development of the entire region. It is evident, as well, that a growing percentage of the citizens of the region recognize - and are prepared to support - new forms of regional government.

4.8 Balancing Jobs and Housing

The GVRD must recognize the critical relationship between jobs and housing and adopt long-term RTC strategies that encourage the evolution of vibrant town centres. One of the original objectives of the town centre strategy was to balance the location of housing and jobs, thereby minimizing the load on the regional transportation system. This remains a valid objective, but a very difficult one to achieve in a time of two income households and highly variable housing prices. Nonetheless, the GVRD can assist the process. There is a tendency to assume that commercial and residential development should proceed at equal rates, thereby achieving balance. In fact, however, most commercial centres are always catching up to the residential trade area. The lesson is that the best way to ensure commercial development is to provide for residential development: commercial expansion will follow residential expansion. Town centres, therefore, must aim to accommodate large inventories of multifamily housing and expect that intense commercial development will follow, rather than insisting on balance from the outset.

4.9 Welcoming Newcomers and Enhancing Community Life

The GVRD must develop a variety of specific policies to welcome newcomers (Canadian migrants and immigrants) and to enhance community life in the region. Growing concerns over population growth in the region must be countered by policies that welcome newcomers, recognizing the importance they play in economic terms. This can best be

achieved by managing change in ways that reassure existing residents that while change will occur, it will be at a pace and in forms that they can both accept and welcome. In this important area, the GVRD must work very closely both with senior levels of government and with ethnic, seniors, cultural, and other community groups. It must also recognize that individual RTCs will evolve into vibrant communities only if they serve their respective populations effectively; it is neither appropriate nor necessary for each centre to develop the same range and number of community services.

4.10 Developing Regional Educational/ Recreational/ Cultural/ Tourism Goals

The GVRD must develop both strategies and mechanisms for effective allocation of major educational/ recreational/ cultural/ tourism facilities. While the current municipal/regional structures can plan for community facilities, it is clear that a regional strategy must be developed to effectively allocate major educational, recreational, cultural, and tourism facilities. In all areas, the health and viability of the region depends on a collective vision in terms of major facilities. Since in every instance the location of such facilities is critical to both the region and each RTC, a strategy must be evolved that adopts a regional view and yet encourages synergy. Some grouping of facilities in respective fields of endeavour may be appropriate.

4.11 RTCs and Senior Governments

The GVRD must make a concerted effort to obtain policy commitments from senior governments (provincial and federal) regarding the location of government buildings. The sitings of major government buildings are important opportunities to reinforce the RTC Policy, and it is therefore critical that the GVRD obtain a commitment from senior levels that all such decisions will involve consultation at the regional level.

4.12 Monitoring Change

The GVRD must develop enhanced methods of monitoring change throughout the region. It is currently difficult to collect comparative data throughout the region. The GVRD should move quickly to have all members provide comparable data on a regular basis both for RTCs and for the municipalities generally.

4.13 Marketing RTCs

The GVRD must co-ordinate a sophisticated marketing strategy for the region to direct investment and location decisions. A co-ordinated and clear marketing strategy is an essential tool in the support of RTCs, providing that the strategy delineates the potential of each RTC and supports the advantages of each. While each municipality will retain primary responsibility for marketing, the GVRD must ensure that potential investors are aware of the range of opportunities available in the region.

4.14 Conclusion

This discussion paper has concluded that the RTC program has functioned quite well for almost two decades. It also concluded that a new policy framework needs to be put into place for the 1990s if the RTCs are to continue to give shape to the region. Fortunately, there is substantial evidence to support the view that municipalities and the public generally accept the RTC Policy as a critical element in the Livable Region Strategy; an element that must have a prominent place in a renewed LRS. This support must be harnessed as a means of enabling the GVRD to tackle complex issues relating to hierarchy, transportation, regional government, and continued growth. Facing the challenges of this decade will require determined organization and coherence, not parochialism.

In general, the region has been well served by its organization and institutions to date, but serious warning signals (regional, national, international) are evident in a variety of spheres - economic, environmental, social, etc. They indicate that many tough policy decisions are required, and are required soon. The fact is that the methods and approaches of the 1970s and 1980s will not work well in the 1990s.

The blunt fact is that few of the required decisions are easily made; allocating scarce resources is never easy. Similarly, however, if decisions are not made, Greater Vancouver will face an uncertain future.

Yet it is possible to manage and even control growth and change, and the successes of the original RTC Policy must be a spur for an even more proactive and visionary strategy to take the GVRD into the next century.